

NOVEMBER 29, 2001

**SCHAKOWSKY CALLS FOR MAJOR INVESTMENT IN PUBLIC HEALTH
INFRASTRUCTURE DURING NATIONAL SECURITY SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING**

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Since the anthrax attacks through the U.S. postal system have occurred, several shortfalls of our public health system have become evident. Not the least of which is the inadequate communications structure that exists to disseminate information to the public and among public health officials in the case of a biological weapons attack or any other sort of public health emergency.

When the first case of anthrax was announced, it was suggested that the victim may have contracted the disease from a stream or some other natural cause. As more and more cases arose, it became clear that it was another case of terrorism. We also learned that the anthrax was being delivered in the mail. This was important information. The problem is, the only information available to the public and to public health officials was from the news media. The media is an important tool that the government needs to utilize to convey important messages to the public. However, CNN and NPR are not enough for state and local health departments and epidemiological experts to be able to take action and respond appropriately.

We need a major investment in our public health infrastructure in this country and it needs to start with communication. The federal government needs to set up a system that operates all day every day and we need to make sure that public health officials throughout the nation have a constant connection. This means for instance, providing fax machines and internet access for every hospital and community health clinic in the United States, pre-established emergency hotlines for the public and public health officials, and much more. We also need to take a closer look at the policies and procedures on information sharing between the law enforcement and intelligence communities and those at the state and local level who are responsible for the health of the American public. But what it boils down to is that we need someone at the federal level to be responsible for creating and implementing this important plan. We need to be prepared before the next time we experience a potential public health emergency in America.